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A Rhetorical Analysis of Stokely Carmichael's *Black Power* (29 Oct 1966)

Black Power, a term popularized by the black activist Stokely Carmichael in 1965, began to take hold within the civil rights movement in the mid 1960s, despite its controversial implications. Some members of the black community were growing frustrated with the lack of progress towards civil rights that Martin Luther King Jr. was trying to reach. Among them was Carmichael, a principle leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), an organization originally established for the purpose of organizing sit-ins and freedom rides in the South and encouraging integration. After the Selma campaign in 1965, SNCC began to shift its intentions from supporting similar motives of Martin Luther King and his SCLC organization towards fostering Black Power and opposition towards the Vietnam War. Black Power represented a completely different approach towards civil rights activism; the movement encouraged African Americans to “stress black self-determination” and celebrate “black pride,” as opposed to integration (Gallagher).

On October 29th, 1966, students from the University of California, Berkley involved with the student activist group Students for a Democratic Society (an organization for anti-war activism and free speech) conducted a day-long conference on the matter of Black Power. Although he was presented with a considerable amount of controversy from the school and the local chapter of the Afro-American Student Union

(AASU), Carmichael chose to be the keynote speaker at the conference. Worthy of attention was the large sign behind the podium which presented the words *Black Power* boldly. A detail quickly picked up by the audience, the banner highlighted the focus of the event. In an effort to draw the audience in quickly, Carmichael begins his speech with humor by referring to UC Berkley as “the white intellectual ghetto of the west.” His attempt at pathos draws the audience in by exhibiting his personality and knowledge.

The humor doesn't end, as he proceeds to refer to news reporters as “advertisers” who engage in “intellectual masturbation on the question of Black Power.” Carmichael references existentialist philosophers Camus, Sartre, and Fanon and alludes to argument theory throughout his speech. Drawing upon his own ethos by communicating his knowledge shows the audience he is intelligent and credible. The audience is unaware of it, but Carmichael is setting a precedent for the rest of his speech where he will teeter back and forth between empathetic and critical statements. It is important to note that the 10,000 person audience consisted of mostly white, well-to-do liberal students and teachers, and only a handful of African Americans. To reach this new, curious audience and spread the motives of Black Power, Carmichael addresses the exigence that “man must condemn himself,” generalizes the term and movement of Black Power, and addresses the setting and juxtapositions between whites and blacks.

“Man cannot condemn himself”

To introduce the question of how African Americans shall overcome their struggles, Carmichael brings forward the issue of whether man can condemn himself or not for the crimes he has imposed on African Americans. The idea of condemnation

helps pathetically to establish the argument and criticism that America's societal racism is not just physical and verbal based, but also structurally based, further highlighting the aspects of racism that the white community is completely missing. He claims that if a man condemns himself, he would "...have to inflict punishment upon himself," and since a man would never inflict punishment on himself, he cannot. To support his claim, and to develop ethos, he references an example concerning the whites of Neshoba County, Mississippi. If the white citizens of Neshoba had condemned the sheriff for his brutal actions of killing three humans, Carmichael explains, the citizens would be condemning themselves since they elected the sheriff into office. He generalizes this idea by questioning whether America can condemn herself for the racism it has inflicted upon African Americans, but he says, "America cannot condemn herself" either; the black community itself will therefore condemn white America by rising up from the cruel punishment they have been subjected to.

Carmichael's hypothesis about condemnation pathetically challenges the audience to see the exigence from his perspective. He denounces America; his claims become quite extreme: "We must question the values of this society....The American pie means raping South Africa, beating Vietnam....raping the Philippines." As militant as these ideas sound, stretching the truth may anger his audience, but helps them realize how serious this problem is to African Americans by further touching on the idea of freedom for some versus freedom for all. His claims help to extend Black Power to a universal crowd; racism is not just affecting communities locally but is affecting people and states internationally.

Generalizing the Idea of Black Power

The setting of Carmichael's speech is worth noting. The University of California at Berkeley is an esteemed cultural institution which yields intellectuals and scholars. The audience present was not the type of audience that a civil rights activist like King would preach to. He is mindful of the probability that the mostly white and well-off audience will not be as radical as he is, but works to bridge the gap between his extremist ideas and the audience's understanding and curiosity of them. Black Power was spawned by the student led militancy of SNCC, thus Black Power advocates like Carmichael already had a strong base for support at college campuses, since most white, and black, college students were in favor of civil rights (Ogbar 136). By criticizing white society and America itself, he attempts to have the audience empathize with him.

Carmichael draws upon the kairoitic moment to generalize the idea of Black Power and spread awareness of its misconceptions. Four months prior to his speech at Berkeley, in Greenwood, Mississippi, he had begun to drift towards radical ideas and declared Black Power a movement that would be taking a competitive stance against movements similar to those promoted to King's. A key motive of his speech is to motivate the audience to help in making the changes necessary to overcome racism. In his speech, Carmichael wants to get the Black Power movement accepted by a new type of demographic. His attempt conveys the message that Black Power is not concerned with integration, a motive stressed by King, but is concerned with combating white supremacy. Carmichael stresses the importance of having African Americans attain positions of power and jobs within their communities, instead of integrating into white communities. Indirectly bringing up the peace movement sweeping across college

campuses, especially at liberal schools like Berkley, he rallies the crowd and brings them to their feet, teetering back from denouncing the audience to empathizing with audience. Juxtapositions between the black perspective and white perspective work to strengthen his argument for why Black Power will be more of a success than simply non-violent protests and demonstrations. As much as his contrasting statements separate the white audience from himself, constantly criticizing white people for degrading and dehumanizing blacks helps an audience divided from the speaker to now want to empathize with his struggles. Carmichael's pathetic appeals challenge his audience to understand that they should overcome the fear of being outwardly radical and should not be scared to go into their communities and call upon their friends and neighbors to do the same. This idea of his supports a greater motif of his speech, where he attempts to get whites and blacks to explore their position in relation to each other and relation to institutions of power present in society.

Rhetoric of the use of “Negro”

Finally, Carmichael juxtaposes the difference between the terms *black* and *Negro* in order to justify why he calls the campaign the Black Power movement. He claims the word black has a negative connotation for whites. His contrasts between the connotations of *Black Power* versus *Negro Power* versus *power for colored people* are noteworthy because of his indirect reference to Malcolm X's description of a *black revolution* and *Negro revolution*, and the concept of the house and field Negroes, references he made in *Message to the Grassroots*, a speech given in Detroit, Michigan in 1963. Malcolm X classifies Negroes during slavery into two categories; *field Negroes*, who are the majority of slaves that work on farms and are always looking to escape and

house Negroes, those that live in the home, take care of the family, and are content with their lives. Carmichael elucidates his reasoning for calling his movement black power for the fact that *Negro*, or *colored people*, does not hold the negative undertone that the world *black* holds. No one would be intimidated by the word *Negro*, since it was used to refer to slaves; the term *Negro* is almost used to mask white fear. However Black Power has a greater connotation than being aggressive. Interestingly, Carmichael only uses *Negro* twice in his oration, once in referring to his own people and once in the context of this concept. Carmichael's emphasis on the word *black* and *power* almost puts the name on a pedestal, implying that the goal is to become higher in society than whites.

In his speech at Berkley, Stokely Carmichael informs his audience of the benefits of Black Power through rhetorical strategies that catch the audience's attention and keeps them engaged. While taking the risky move of criticizing white supremacy in front of a mostly white crowd, Carmichael also manages to get the audience to empathize with the struggles the black community has been facing through the successful use of pathos and ethos. His knowledge of well-known philosophers and his prominence as a key African American activist build his credibility as a speaker. His appeal to pathos entertains the audience and helps to have the audience empathize with him.

Considering the atmosphere caused from the ongoing Vietnam War and the growing frustration with lack of integration, Carmichael uses the kairotic moment to generalize the Black Power movement and ideas associated with it to reach a new demographic and prompt change in American politics and culture.

Works Consulted

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